

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

DD/A Registry

File *Security 5-1*

April 12, 1978

Executive Registry  
78-8815

The President  
The White House  
Washington, D. C. 20500

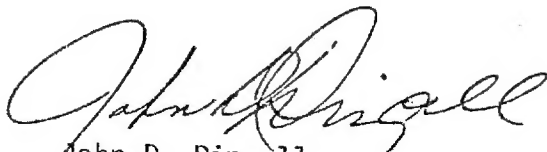
Dear Mr. President;

The attached article from the May issue of Outside magazine, published by Rolling Stone, raises serious allegations about a CIA operation in India during the 1960's -- apparently carried out without the knowledge of the Indian Government.

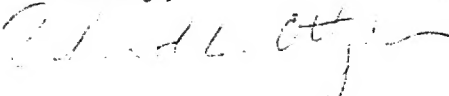
According to the author, Howard Kohn, there are two nuclear-powered monitoring devices -- allegedly for the surveillance of Chinese atomic weapons testing -- high in the Himalayas. The devices, containing plutonium, were placed on two mountains, one of which, Nanda Devi, is the source of India's Ganges River, the holy river for millions of Hindus.

One of the monitoring stations is said to have been buried by an avalanche, and thus might be currently leaking plutonium into the Ganges. If this is true, it would be a serious problem, indeed.

We request that you investigate this matter and inform us fully of your findings. If the article is in fact accurate, we strongly urge that this Nation take whatever steps may be necessary to resolve this serious and embarrassing situation.

  
John D. Dingell  
Member of Congress

Sincerely,

  
Richard L. Ottinger  
Member of Congress

cc: Hon. Nani A. Palkhivala, Indian Ambassador to the United States  
Hon. Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State  
Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence  
Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Assistant for National Security Affairs  
Hon. Clement J. Zablocki, Chairman, House International Relations Commi  
Hon. John Sparkman, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Hon. Edward P. Boland, Chairman, House Select Committee on Intelligence  
Hon. Birch Bayh, Chairman, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

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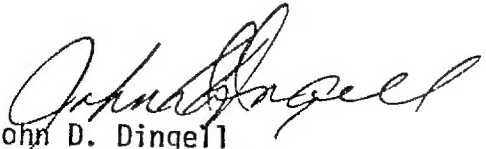
Hon. Nani A. Palkhivala  
Ambassador Extraordinary and  
Plenipotentiary  
Embassy of India  
2107 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D. C. 20008

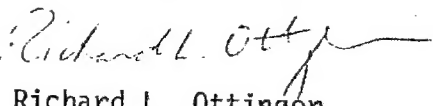
Dear Mr. Ambassador:

As you will see from the enclosed letter to President Carter and the enclosed article from the May issue of Outside magazine, allegations have been made that there are nuclear-powered monitoring stations in the Himalayas which may have been placed there by the American CIA.

We would like to request that your government provide us with any information which it may possess relating to this issue.

Sincerely,

  
John D. Dingell  
Member of Congress

  
Richard L. Ottinger  
Member of Congress

cc: Hon. Jimmy Carter, President of the United States  
Hon. Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State  
Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence  
Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Assistant for National Security Affairs  
Hon. Clement J. Zablocki, Chairman, House International Relations Commi  
Hon. John Sparkman, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Hon. Edward P. Boland, Chairman, House Select Committee on Intelligence  
Hon. Birch Bayh, Chairman, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence



# THE NANDA DEVI CAPER

How the CIA used American mountaineers to plant a nuclear-powered spy station in the Himalaya.

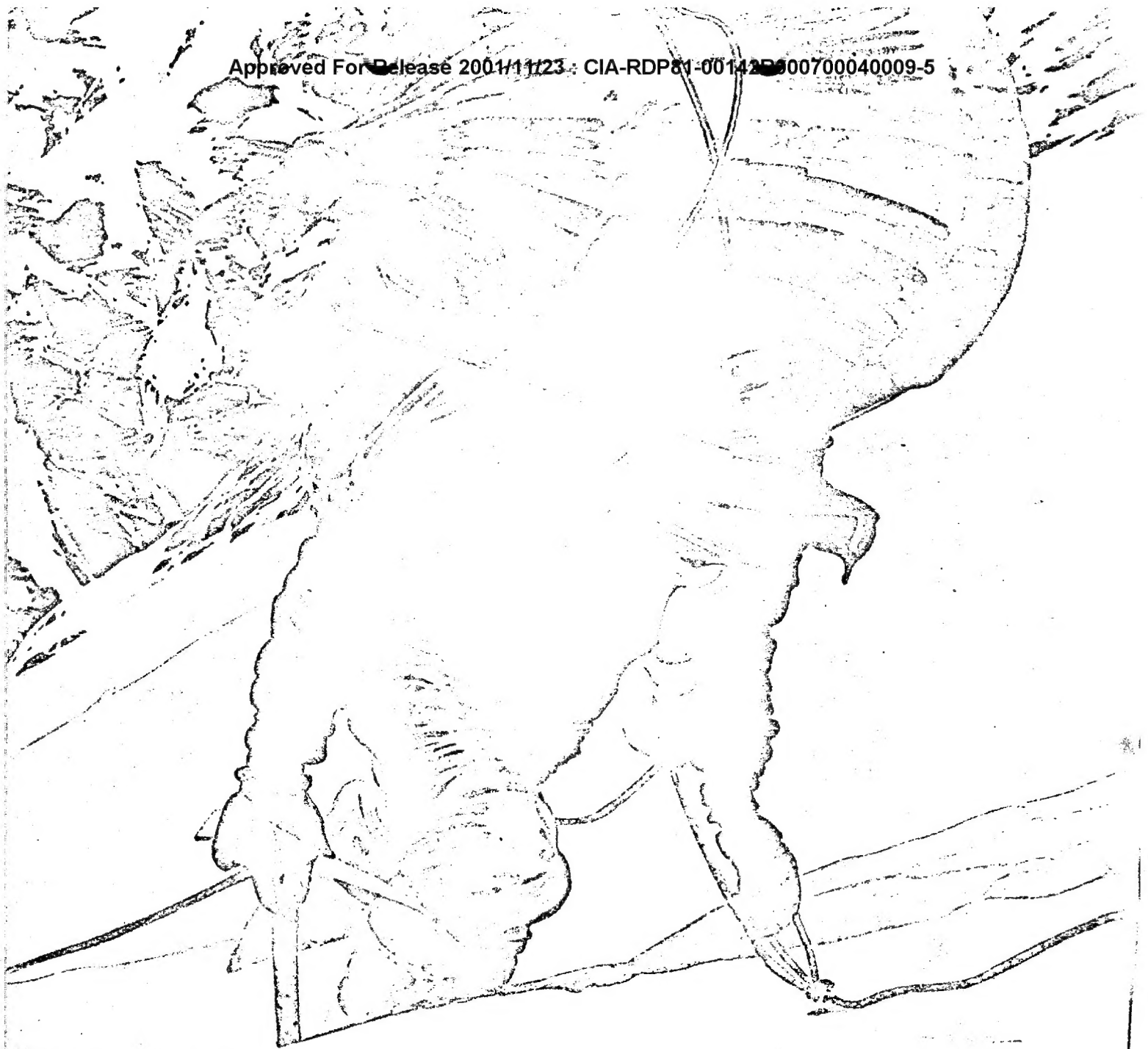


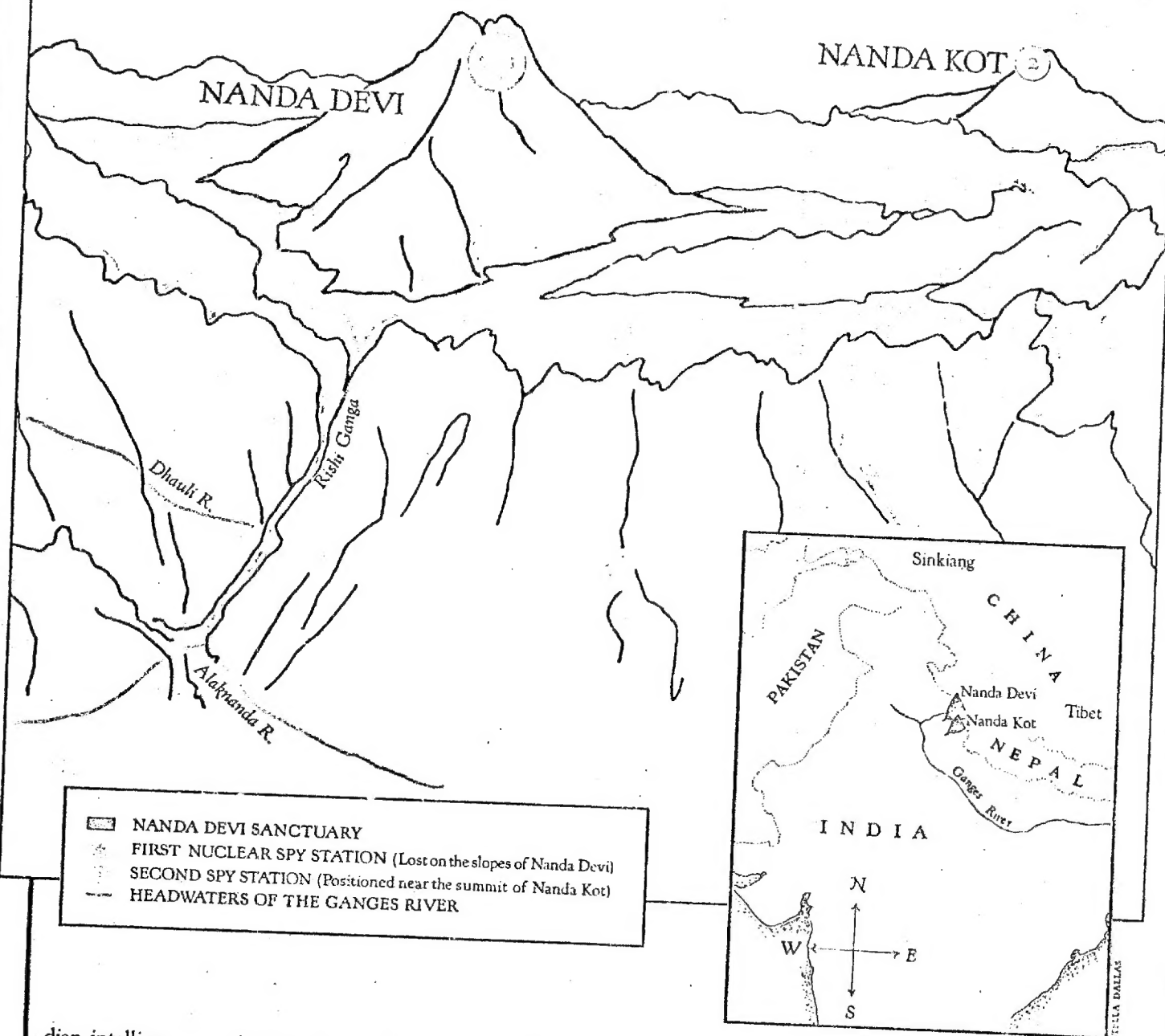
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE McMACKEN

**T**he pristine, upper reaches of the Indian Himalaya hold a deadly secret. During a 1965 spy mission the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) lost a SNAP generator on a mountainside in India's Uttar Pradesh state, and this nuclear power pack, filled with plutonium-238, is still there. Until the plutonium deteriorates, which may take centuries, the device will remain a radioactive menace that could leak into the Himalayan snow and infiltrate the Indian river system through the headwaters of the Ganges.

"It is a hazardous situation," says Dr. Arthur Tamplin, a biophysicist formerly with the Atomic Energy Commission. Every effort should be made to recover it. I don't understand why that wasn't done right away."

The U.S. government gave up its search for the device after a short-term feckless effort. Instead, aided by some of America's best mountain climbers, the CIA covertly placed a second SNAP generator on another Indian mountain where, after serving the agency's purposes, it also was abandoned.

The following article is the first public account of the entire misadventure. It is based on information from eight of the 14 mountaineers who participated in the project and on interviews with some of the U.S. intelligence community.



dian intelligence, setting up the arrangement on an informal basis to preserve the CIA's absolute authority over the project. The CIA demanded that the CBI, which relies heavily on U.S. spy expertise, keep the affair secret from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and other ranking officials of the government that then ruled India.

The CIA was concerned that the Gandhi government might veto the project as needlessly provocative since India's relations with China were then at the flash point. Border skirmishes on India's northern and northeastern frontiers had erupted into a miniwar in 1962, and Nanda Devi, the CIA-targeted mountain, is near a disputed area still claimed by both countries.

The CIA did give [redacted] a green light on the project, but the agency also asked him not to notify the Gandhi

government, a circumstance that later became another reason for the U.S. coverup.

**I**n late 1964 the American climbers mustered at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, where they took the oath that binds together spies everywhere: never to reveal anything to anyone unto death. From there they were ferried to Harvey Point, North Carolina, some in a spy plane that had all identifying numbers and markings censored from the fuselage and all windows except the pilot's opaque.

Harvey Point is a small town on the coast of North Carolina. Behind the front gates is a high-powered center for munitions and explo-

In all, 14 of America's best climbers signed on with the CIA. The agency's proposition included a guarantee of \$1000 a month, a free and exotic trip, an exciting climb and a modest patriotic benediction.

A pack loaded with a heavy metal contraption makes no sense for an ascent into the icy, thin air of the Himalaya. But this pack was special. It radiated a warmth that seemed to cling even after the pack was removed. All the Indian porters wanted to carry it. The Americans, who knew what was inside, were a little less enthusiastic. They weren't sure how many radioactive isotopes were leaking out with the heat.

The climbers were convoying parts for a 125-pound tracking device they hoped to assemble and mount atop Nanda Devi, one of the tallest peaks in India. They were the workhorses for a CIA operation to eavesdrop across the border into China. Inside the pack was the latest in CIA technology: a nuclear SNAP generator to power the tracking device.

The CIA team had started up Nanda Devi after the autumn monsoons of 1965. But razor-sharp winds and unseasonal storms delayed them and then winter's approach forced them to retreat short of the top. Intending to return in spring to finish the mission, they found a sheltered cranny on the southern lee of the mountain and stashed the special pack.

Not until the next spring did they discover their miscalculation. The CIA gimmickry had been lost in a capricious winter avalanche.

The glaciers of Nanda Devi are part of the headwaters of the Ganges, the holy river for 450 million Hindus. For the CIA to have contaminated India's hallowed waters with plutonium, or even to have risked that possibility, was an unprecedented breach of the unwritten international nuclear code. The incident could have been far more politically embarrassing than the radioactive pollution the Soviet Union's Cosmos 954 satellite rained on northwest Canada in January 1978—except that the CIA was able to keep its mishap covered up.

The Nanda Devi project began as a sort of high-minded compromise. China had exploded a nuclear bomb at Lop Nor in barren Sinkiang province on October 16th, 1964. It was China's first nuclear success and its reverberations were felt in Washington.

The U.S. reaction was divided into two camps. At the Pentagon there was a temporary "red alert" while the Joint Chiefs of Staff, afraid that China was on the verge of a military offensive, argued for a preventive first strike. At the State Department the moribund Chinese desk saw an opportunity to open up talks with Peking.

President Lyndon Johnson dismissed both ideas as opposite extremes and instead acceded to the CIA's alternative proposal: a spy mission to measure China's nuclear capabilities.

U.S. reconnaissance satellites were still unsophisticated at that time, and the few in orbit were all marshaled incon-

veniently over the Soviet Union. So the CIA conceived of an ambitious expedition to place a nuclear-powered monitoring device on an Indian mountaintop near Sinkiang, where it could pick up signals from China's nuclear tests and track Chinese nuclear-warhead missiles.

The CIA solicited American climbers with previous high Himalayan and Alaskan experience, and many gladly agreed to help. The CIA's proposition included a guarantee of \$1000 a month for a job estimated to take about a year, plus a free and exotic trip, an exciting climb and a modest patriotic benediction.

Most climbers viewed the offer as serendipitous luck. One climber was working at two jobs, trying to support a family and survive his final year of graduate school. The CIA money came as a windfall. The agency also interceded with a university dean to drop some academic requirements so he could earn an early degree. The climber ended up spending part of his year "acclimatizing" at a hotel on Jungfrau in the Swiss Alps; he had a nice vacation and was never called upon for Himalayan duty.

Most of the others shared similar perspectives. "How many times do you get a chance for a free boondoggle?" explains one. "I'd do it again if the same situation presented itself. I had a lot of fun."

For two premier climbers, however, the project became a three-year commitment. One, a brilliant student of the life sciences, had been a track star in the Fifties. He was known for his determination as a climber. (He once gritted through an enormously painful leg fracture while spidering up Mount McKinley). He and the CIA were mutually impressed. "There are few times in a man's life when he can truly say he was the right man for a job and that his being there made a difference," he later wrote in a letter. "I can say that about my work for the CIA."

The other was an engineer and inventor. He was also the most openly patriotic of the group, and one fellow climber dubbed him "the patriot." He viewed the CIA offer as a summons to serve his country, and he guarded his involvement in the project with zeal. Friends say he did not even tell his wife the full story.

Several years afterward, British climber Chris Bonington sought him out for advice as Bonington was about to climb Changabang, another peak in the same Himalayan cluster as Nanda Devi. "I don't want to know about your secret mission," Bonington explained. "I'd just like to know what the territory is like."

"You must be mistaken," the patriot replied. "I've never been to that part of India." Despite coaxing, he refused to say anything about the scene of the project.

In all, 14 American climbers signed on with the CIA, though ultimately only nine were sent to India. They were joined by four of India's best mountaineers from the 1962 Indian Everest expedition.

In addition, the CIA had the unofficial cooperation of its Indian counterpart, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). American undercover agents on the CBI payroll co-opted in-



sives testing. The Navy operates the facilities with other government agencies. The CIA trained anti-Castro Cubans at Harvey Point before the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, and the agency took the mountaineers there for a crash course in nuclear-age espionage.

Bill McNeff, a short, wiry CIA lifer, was the case officer in charge. He was assisted by a demolitions expert, a former U-2 pilot, an in-house Sinologist, a psychiatrist armed with a polygraph and a squadron of lesser strategists. The tableau was cloaked in immediacy and intrigue. The demolitions expert confided the subtleties of plastic explosives, teaching the climbers how to carve an L-shaped recess in an icy mountainside to use as a platform for the tracking station; and another technician put them through an erector-set exercise on how to assemble the apparatus.

But most of the spy-book garnishings, according to one climber, "were just meant to impress us—and waste a lot of time." The psychiatrist used his lie detector to quiz the group about drugs, homosexuality, fidelity (marital and national), and, with dedicated professional myopia, about any friends who might be communists.

"After a while," another climber recalls, "we spent most of our time playing volleyball and doing some serious drinking." The liquor, he says, helped fight the ennui of droning, one-dimensional lectures on the Asian mentality.

Toward the end of the session, the CIA brought in the four Indian climbers. The two groups introduced themselves and were soon exchanging stories of high adventure.

After a few weeks at Harvey Point, the climbers were flown to Mount McKinley in Alaska, at 20,320 feet the highest peak in the 50 states. The National Park Service closed off the south face of McKinley from other mountaineers while the newly fashioned team tested logistics. The warm-up did not go well. Distressing weather and other difficulties kept them from the summit, an unfriendly omen the CIA chose to ignore.

By fall 1965 the group was gathered in northern India, and for the first time the Americans were obliged to observe the anonymity of espionage. Because this was not an officially sanctioned climb, India's CBI agents were worried that local villagers might take undue interest in the incongruous assembly, and they directed the Americans to keep their faces averted and their conversations to monosyllables as they traveled toward the mountain.

A helicopter flew the climbers to a meadow in the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, and they hiked across the short, fragile grass the final steps to base camp. The sanctuary, about 14,000 feet high and circumscribed by mountains, may be India's only remaining inviolate range for the rare Himalayan blue sheep. Livestock do not compete for the vegetation, and few hunters have ever been allowed access.

Nanda Devi, a thrust of high-angle rock and snow, is an imposing presence in the Uttar Pradesh region near India's northeastern border, about 500 miles south and four miles above the Sinkiang plains. Originally, the CIA had determined that a height of 27,000 feet was necessary to give its tracking device an efficiently commanding view of Sinkiang. But after some last-minute slide-rule manipulations, the CIA lowered its sights to Nanda Devi's 25,645-foot summit. Nanda Devi, which the agency later code-named "Blue Mountain," takes its name from a goddess in Hindu mythology.

Above base camp, in the quickening dusk, the climbers could see immutable rocks fading into the distance. Beyond, shrouded in mist, long chutes of snow frosted the mountain. Under the best of conditions Nanda Devi presents

fair. Wind, snow and high angle combine to make the mountain ruthless beyond its size; the climbers would have to be alert for the shivering, tympanic boom that announces avalanche.

The climb ahead promised to be monumental. Only two previous expeditions had stood on the peak, and they had not been burdened with the extra CIA weight.



If anyone asked, the American climbers were in Uttar Pradesh under the auspices of the Air Force High Altitude Test program (HAT), an appropriate acronym since the special pack that left a warm spot on the porters' backs was shaped like a stovepipe hat.

The metal hat, about two feet tall and three feet around, was a SNAP (Space Nuclear Auxiliary Power) generator—the centerpiece of the tracking device. When assembled, it sat on a base that looked like a stubby flagpole and was attached by cable to an electronic box. The generator powered the box that was to relay the antenna's monitorings to a CIA telemetry expert at a base station about 40 miles away.

The key to Operation HAT was a thin fuel rod that fit in a hole running through the core of the SNAP generator. The fuel rod contained plutonium-238, a lethal nuclear synthetic that produces heat as it decays. The layers of metal around the fuel rod were designed to reach different temperatures, creating an imbalance to generate electricity. The fuel rod would expend itself in a manner similar to a dry-cell battery, but if the CIA's nuclear wizards were right, the electronic box could feed on the radioactivity for 75 years or more.

The fuel rod arrived at the Nanda Devi base camp in a ponderous lead liner, a container much too heavy to accompany the expedition. The climbers collected to watch as the rod was carefully inserted in the metal hat. "After it was safely in," says one climber, "we sort of took turns touching the core. You could feel the heat."

The former track star, the patriot, two other American climbers, four Indians and the porters formed the first Blue Mountain expedition. They set out up the south face in September 1965. Their objective was the summit or a spot near the top on the north face overlooking Sinkiang. But the weather and the mountain conspired against them.

They were about 2000 feet shy of the summit when they agreed to turn around. Rather than undo all their labor, however, they stored the CIA cargo among the rocks to await their return.

A well-known climber from the 1963 American expedition up Everest was added to the team for spring 1966. He was skilled in electronics and map-making. As the team maneuvered back up in April, however, the newest member sucked in more frostbitten air than his lungs could endure. He began wheezing and spitting bloody fuzz and had to turn back while the others continued toward their position of a half-year before.

But their cache was gone, swept away under a torrent of mountain rubble. A wall of snow and fragments of cliff had broken loose from above and come surging down, leaving behind a clumsy artistry of resculptured furrows and hollows on the spot where they now stood dumbfounded.

The expedition bivouacked to contemplate its next move. The patriot perceived the mission in strict military terms and he voted to return to base camp for further orders. But the patriot did not want to be denied a chance to conquer the remaining 2000 feet. While the patriot waited, he scrambled to the 25,645-foot summit, a feat that still ranks as

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# If the Hindu population ever learned that the CIA's nuclear power pack was missing, maybe shattered, in the headwaters of the Ganges, there would be an inexorable hunt for scapegoats back in Washington.

the highest solo ascent by an American—though, of course, it was never publicly recorded.

He reached the top without trouble, but his trip down was more treacherous. As he approached the camp he lost his footing and went sprawling several hundred feet down a snowy incline, miraculously coming to rest, unhurt, just short of a cradle of sharp rocks.

**N**ews of the lost device shook Bill McNeff and the other Operation HAT officers. They did not have to be told of the somber diplomatic implications or of their imperiled careers. If the Hindu population ever learned that the CIA's nuclear power pack was missing, maybe shattered, in the Ganges headwaters, there would be an inexorable hunt for scapegoats back in Washington.

The spring thaw on the southern slope of Nanda Devi is a major source of water for the Ganges. The Rishi Ganga River crashes down the slope into the Dhaul River, which joins the Alaknanda about 9000 feet below Nanda Devi Sanctuary. The Alaknanda is one of the largest tributaries flowing into the Ganges, the 1557-mile dispenser of life for a parched land. The Alaknanda-Dhaul junction is a sacred place the Hindus call Vishnuprayag. A temple sits on a rocky ledge dividing the two rivers, and for hundreds of years Hindu worshipers, clinging to ringbolts against the cold tug of the current, have paraded down stone steps into waters from Nanda Devi's slopes.

The CIA located the debris of the avalanche on the mountain's southern profile about 3000 feet above the sanctuary. Retrieving the SNAP generator, however, posed unfamiliar problems. What could be used, thousands of feet in the air, to bulldoze through tons of rock and snow?

McNeff and the others pondered that, then devised a solution more elegantly creative than the project itself. CIA operatives were dispatched to New Delhi, India's bustling capital, where they shadowed the bazaars and hardware shops. What this undertaking called for was a local guide who had always wanted to be a fireman. The CIA agents were in pursuit of rubber hoses, the black wide-throated kind that firefighters use.

Eventually they managed to buy several hoses, of varying lengths, which were helicoptered back to the sanctuary and hauled up Blue Mountain. Jointed together, the hoses became one long rubber snake with its mouth stuck in a slanting mountain stream and its tail swishing through the rubble.

The diverted water was supposed to wash away the snow and exhume the nuclear treasure below. In theory, perhaps, the idea held traces of brilliance. But a mountain stream is not easily converted into a fireplug. Mud and sticks clogged the hose opening, requiring a frigid cleaning every few minutes; and water pressure at the other end was equal to that of a bucket being emptied out a first-floor window. The awesome mound created by the avalanche, about the size of a Giza pyramid, stood unmoved.

The CIA cleanup operation was a disaster. A last, unhappy report was sent to base camp and radioed on to Wash-

ington. There a decision was made. The nuclear device was to be abandoned in the snow with the optimistic presumption it would stay there.

Top CIA officials were anxious to keep the agency's misadventure similarly buried. They did not inform Prime Minister Gandhi's government, and they pressured India's CBI officers, who were compromised by their earlier complicity, to maintain their silence. The CIA allegedly also concealed its decision from the LBJ White House.

In so doing, the agency opted for a long-term gamble. Plutonium-238 remains dangerously radioactive for 500 to 5000 years, and even if the SNAP generator had survived the avalanche intact, its outer shell would eventually corrode and release its poisonous core. Handling or inhaling plutonium can be fatal, and it would be impossible to retrieve the radioactive material once it escaped into the snow. If it reached the Ganges River system, it could cause cancer in anyone who drank even microscopic amounts or ate contaminated fish.

In Uttar Pradesh, meanwhile, a weary irritation had settled over Operation HAT. The men had been up the mountain three times, an unplanned investment of work and courage, and yet it had defied them each time. Their mission was unfulfilled, and in Washington the project was being viewed as a zero-turned-negative.

Everyone was on edge. The CBI agents, angry and nervous about the position in which the CIA's deceit had placed them, grew arbitrary and short tempered. The climbers, unaccustomed to the fatuous nature of undercover work, began to question overall strategy. A rift opened in the CIA ranks between the Chinese and Indian specialists, who seized on this excuse to vent longstanding jealousies. And the uncomplaining porters took abuse from all sides, as if their presence had somehow jinxed an otherwise flawless plan.

Tensions flared. In the midst of one confrontation one American climber lunged over a desk and, with one punch, upended a CBI agent from his chair. Another climber commandeered a military helicopter at the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and flew to New Delhi, 200 miles away, for an unannounced showdown with the head of Indian intelligence. Both climbers were back in the States soon afterwards.

A third American, a magazine photojournalist who served as liaison between the CIA and the climbers and whose recommendations persuaded many climbers to enlist, had quit earlier in disgust. He had felt insulted by the agency's lack of appreciation for the difficulties of mountaineering. The CIA's technocrats had continued to change their minds about the elevation needed to make the tracking device work. Their first guess had been 27,000 feet, then 25,500, and, after the fiasco at 21,500, they had decided 21,000 would be adequate. What the CIA did not seem to understand was that, because of diminishing oxygen at high altitudes, the difference between 21,000 and 27,000 feet in mountaineering is like the difference between *My Friend Flicker* and *Moby Dick* in literature.

While the CIA was floundering, the Chinese were building launching pads for their nuclear missiles throughout Szechwan.



On October 27th, 1966, **Approved For Release 2001/11/23 : CIA-RDP81-00142R000700040009-5**  
a pad in central Sinkiang, right under the nose of the CIA's  
unsensing tracking device.

**I**n early 1967 Bill McNeff was terminated as the agent in charge of Operation HAT. Most of the climbers liked McNeff's Irish street-kid attitude and vernacular, and they felt he was being unfairly singled out for blame. But McNeff's removal was part of a final effort to rehabilitate the project. Another American from the prestigious 1963 Everest expedition had been recruited to help replace the climbers who'd left, and another mountain, Nanda Kot, had been selected as the new target.

Nanda Kot stands adjacent to Nanda Devi and, to keep its score card straight, the CIA code-named it "Red Mountain." The climbers, however, had no trouble telling the two apart. Shorter and squatter, the 22,470-foot Kot clearly lacks the prodigious ferocity of its neighbor.

The new recruit arrived in New Delhi in March 1967, two weeks ahead of his teammates, all veterans of Blue Mountain and in no rush for any extra reconnoitering with the terrain. For this attempt the Indians insisted on even more elaborate security precautions. One American, a CIA radio operator, had such arid, alabaster features that he was conspicuous in any crowd, but, after a hushed conference, the Indians produced a disguise: Man-Tan, an American drugstore potion that fabricates a suntan. It turned his skin a carotene-brown.

The Americans were trucked in late-night darkness to a New Delhi military base, flown to a remote airport in Uttar Pradesh, then helicoptered to a Nanda Kot base camp. The Indian climbers met them there in April and, as warm winds softened the winter austerity, the group roped up Nanda Kot, packing along the components of a substitute plutonium-fueled device.

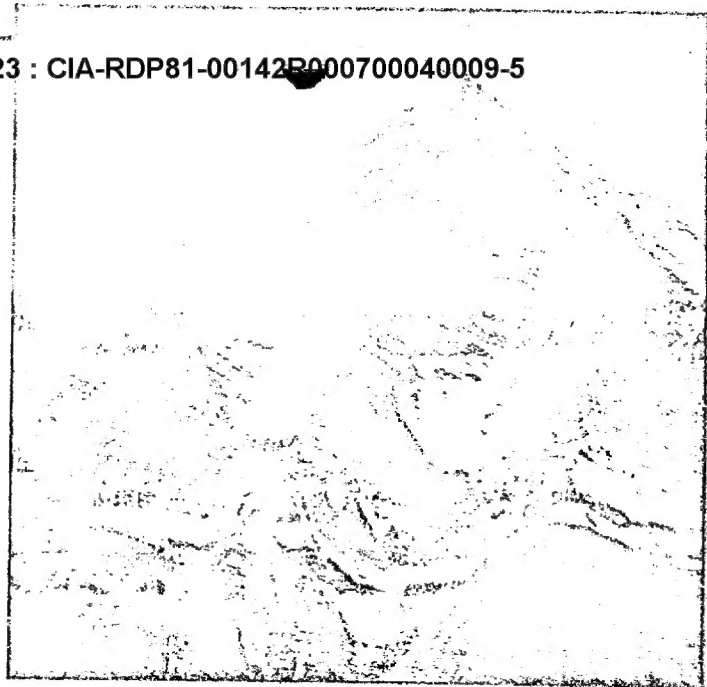
They proceeded cautiously, searching for the best route in the black-and-white patterns, avoiding the long, perpendicular chutes where avalanches, loosened by the morning sun, could rumble down. They were about halfway to the top when a blizzard blocked their way. The bad weather persisted, and finally they had to return to camp, a hurried trip that was interrupted by another crisis. Without warning an avalanche trapped and almost killed two of the climbers.

The two men escaped, however, and a few days later the team moved up again. This time the climb was successful. They found a suitable bump on the north ridge at the 21,000-foot level and, after some minor remodeling of the area, they set up the tracking station.

It worked. The nuclear battery, still warm to the touch in the frosty air, hummed and vibrated as the antenna scanned the northern horizon. The climbers celebrated briefly, in keeping with the occasion and the climate, then retraced their path downward.

Operation HAT seemed over. But a year later the CIA was back in Uttar Pradesh and yet another team was asked to scale Red Mountain. A winter storm had laid siege to the CIA's spindly alpine robot and imprisoned it in a tomb of snow. The agency mounted a fifth expedition, made up of Indians and porters, to dig out and repair the device in spring 1968.

The antenna continued to transmit signals from Sinkiang for another year. But, by then, it was no longer needed. The U.S. had launched a new surveillance system. The U.S. over-the-horizon radar from Taiwan, had assumed the task of scouting China's nuclear movements.



*Summit of Nanda Devi viewed from the Rishi Gorge.*

**T**he four American mountaineers from the successful 1967 expedition returned home in triumph, though the fanfare had to be restricted to a tight circle of friends because of the earlier oaths they'd taken. An irrepressible CIA recruiter, impressed with one climber's sideline abilities as a tinkerer-technician, tried to draft him for an Arctic spy mission. But he declined, and, as far as is known, the American alpine community's affiliation with the agency came to an end.

One of the four opened a TV repair shop, another went into the outdoor-equipment business, and a third took up filmmaking. The former track star's skills led the government to offer him an astronaut's uniform. But after five leaves of absence, three overseas trips and 18 months of lost time, he preferred a career in academia.

He was subsequently stunned a short while later when he learned that the Pentagon had another form of government service in mind for him, that it wasn't voluntary and that it was even more dangerous than Blue Mountain. He had expected his CIA stint to compensate for two years of active military duty, but the Pentagon disagreed and he feared he would be shipped to Vietnam. In a June 1968 letter to his congressman, he pleaded his case: "I really thought that after the final and highly successful 1967 expedition that logic would triumph over bureaucracy. What I have done to serve my country seems at least equal to or exceeds that of many [others]."

The congressman agreed but all he could arrange was a state-side assignment close to where the climber's wife was working. As he dutifully put in two more years, the ex-spy had time to reflect on what, for him, had been the final episode of Operation HAT.

The CIA had summoned him to its headquarters in early 1968. He was escorted into an inner sanctum to an audience with Vice-Admiral Rufus Taylor, the agency's number-two official, and then, in an earnest ceremony, he was decorated for meritorious service. As soon as the epaulet was in place, however, a CIA agent stepped forward to unpin it and return it to the admiral. Taylor told him, or even mention that he'd been given one—because it might damage the national security.